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ABSTRACT

A discussion of journal writing in an English composition class at a Japanese university focuses on how, why, and with what results students were assigned the writing of a lengthy journal as a course requirement. The first part of the discussion presents the rationale behind the decision to give students the assignment. The second part describes the student participants and how the assignment was administered. The various problems encountered during the course are discussed in the third part, such as the amount of time involved in keeping or reviewing a journal, as well as solutions to the problems. The next part reports the results of an informal survey of student attitudes toward the journal assignment, and the final section summarizes the advantages of the assignment and suggests possibilities for further research. A brief bibliography is provided. (MSE)

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The Journal Assignment in Composition Class at a Japanese University

by

Brant M. KRESOVICH •

英作文のクラスに於ける英文日記の課題について

ブラント・M・クレソヴイッチ

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ブラント・M・クレソヴイッチ

この拙論は学生の英語の文章力を効率的に向上させる為の指導法について論じている。英文日記を付けることによって、学習者の文章力は高まり、個性的な表現力及び自信すら生じてくると考えられる。

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The purpose of this paper is to describe why, how, and with what results university students wrote a lengthy journal as one of the requirements to pass a writing class. The first part of the paper presents the rationale behind the decision to give the assignment. The second section describes the students and how the assignment was administered. The third section discusses various problems encountered during the course of the term and the solutions to them. The next section of the paper reports the results of an informal questionnaire that attempted to ascertain the general impressions of the students toward the journal assignment. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the advantages of the journal assignment and suggests possibilities for further research.

The Rationale

Establishing a requirement to write a long journal during the course of a term seemed to be a worthwhile idea for many reasons. First, as students cannot learn much English without regular practice, they cannot acquire basic writing skills in English unless they write (Knowles, 1986). When faced with the requirement to fill 35 to 40 blank B-5 sized pages, students are forced to begin the act of moving their pens to put down words, express themselves, and fullfill the requirement. This is the first step in overcoming writer's block and combatting the common and self-defeating attitude of "I don't have anything to say." Furthermore, because the task is admittedly onerous and time-consuming, the majority of the students may soon realize the impossibility of writing their journals in Japanese and then translating them into English. Forcing students away from the familiar but slow and stultifying process of direct translation may compel them to approach learning how to write in a new way. Once students start writing directly in English, a major victory has been won: they can then begin to feel more comfortable expressing themselves in a foreign language.

The second reason for assigning the journal was based on the hope that students in writing class would practice what they had learned about organizing prose in their journals. English writing discourse demands topic sentences, controlling ideas, and clarity of exposition and organization. So, while I expected students to overcome writer's block by maintaining a journal, I also expected that rather than jotting down their thoughts more or less randomly, they would begin to use topic sentences with controlling ideas in addition to becoming familiar with writing paragraphs organized according to the conventions of English prose. In short, I thought the journal would provide another place to practice and supplement the composition and in-class writing assignments.

The third reason behind imposing the journal task was to encourage students to express their own thoughts. Students were encouraged to choose any topic whatsoever and to write on it for any length. This freedom to choose and write was felt to be in accordance with assertions by Gorman (1979). He argues that teachers should encourage independent writing along with any other inclination that students show toward verbal creative ability. Further, Bowen (1985) points out that learners need to become accustomed to writing English without fear of ridicule or failure.

The fourth consideration behind the journal idea was related to the above in that by motivating the students to express themselves, the whole process and final completion of the assignment itself would give them a sense of achievement. As Paulston and Bruder (1976) assert, EFL/ESL students need to vent their feelings and put across ideas in order to feel

they are making progress in their new language. This also seemed to apply to the case of students starting to write in a new language. In addition, students may be impressed by their own efforts when they leaf through page after page of their own writing in English. Surely, helping Japanese students, who are notorious for underestimating their own English ability, to foster their own pride and bolster their own confidence was a compelling reason to begin the journal assignment.

The last reason for the assignment was based on my own personal considerations. After a year of teaching in Japan, I felt I did not know my students very well. I sought ways to get to know them better, but being friendly in class, issuing "come any time" invitations to my office and the like did not relax students enough to come and communicate face to face. Thus, I required the journal for a selfish reason: I wanted to read their own words about themselves and their lives so I could gain some insights into what moves sophomore English majors at the University of the Ryukyus. I also thought I could learn about Japanese culture by reading the journals.

To summarize, the journal assignment was given for four main reasons. First, students must write in order to learn how to write. Second, by writing a journal, students will have another medium in which to practice their writing skills. Third, students should have a sense of accomplishment from the work they do. Fourth, when teachers read journals, they can become acquainted with students a little better and identify an individual student's strengths and weaknesses in English. All these seemed good reasons for requiring students to undertake such a demanding and time-consuming task.

The Students & Management of the Assignment

Students who received this assignment were in the compulsory classes of English Composition I and II during the academic year 1987-88 (in the Japanese system, Showa 62). The first term English Composition I students were 21 sophomores, 3 juniors, and 2 seniors for a total of 26. The 27 second term English Composition II students were sophomores except for one junior. They were English majors except one—the junior already mentioned above who was a Sociology major preparing for study in Australia. The eight students who took the elective class called Free English Composition also wrote journals. That class was a mixed group: four English majors and one non-major who were seniors, one English major and one non-major who were juniors, and one non-English major sophomore attended.

Each class was told about the assignment during the first meeting. They were informed that it was a strict requirement of the class. I likened the journal assignment to taking mid-term and final tests in other classes in order to impress on them the strictness of the requirement. However, having discussed the threat of a failing mark, I also sought to explain why the journal was such a strict requirement. They received a hand-out that explained the reasons for the assignment. This explanation was based on Knowles' five aims in assigning a journal to his class. My hand-out contained this passage:

> In conversation class, there is an activity called "free conversation." During this activity, students talk about anything they want. In this writing class, the journal can be called "free writing." When students write in their journals, they can choose any topic that they like and write about it for any length.

There are five main goals in writing a journal. The first aim is to help students become comfortable with writing in English. This is the first time for many students to express their ideas freely in English so they need a great deal of practice. The second goal is to help students become more fluent, accurate and complex in their English writing. Writing a journal helps students write more in less time and in longer sentences with fewer mistakes. The third objective of the journal is to give students the opportunity to develop their own writing style in English. Next, writing a journal can help students change their ideas about the learning process and English in general. Finally, the journal can help students learn about life and themselves.

Next, I stressed three important points. First, I guaranteed the inviolable confidentiality of their journals. It was clear to the students that I would not divulge the contents to anybody. Second, I stressed that while their journals were privileged information and they could choose any topic they wanted to write about, there were two taboo topics: secrets of any kind and comments about other professors.[1] Third, I also emphasized that the length ofa ny topic was totally their own choice. I mentioned that if they wanted to write two lines or five pages on one topic, it was acceptable as long as they filled 40 (for the first term) or 35 (for the second term) B-5 sized pages on every line by the last day of the class. The first term students received the 40-page requirement because I thought the July 8 to September 1 summer vacation gave them extra time to write; also, I did not want them to lose any gains they might have made in fluency by not continuing to practice regularly.

After that, I told the students their journals would be collected about once a month. I divided the class into four groups, designated the individuals in each stack as A, B, C, and D and called their attention to a schedule on their hand-out. Because using the designation of A, B,C and D seemed coldly bureaucratic during the first term, I changed the designations in the second term. Here is the schedule from the second term:

THE SCHEDULE: I will collect your journals on Fridays. You are responsible for giving me the journal at the end of class.

Friday	You must have	Students
Oct 16	3 pages	Bears
23	6 〃	Cranes
30	9 〃	Angel Fish
Nov 6	12 〃	Honey Bees
13	14 〃	Bears
20	16 〃	Cranes
27	18 〃	Angel Fish
Dec 4	20 〃	Honey Bees
11	22 〃	Bears
18	24 〃	Cranes
* * * YOU MUST WRITE ONE PAGE IN YOUR JOURNAL DURING THE NEW YEAR HOLIDAYS * * *		
Jan 8	27 〃	Angel Fish
22	29 〃	Honey Bees
29	31 〃	Bears, Cranes

Feb 22	33 〃	Angel Fish, Honey Bees
12	35 〃	All

Finally, I told all the classes I would also keep a journal and do the some amount of writing in Japanese as they did in English. This elicted some gasps and smirks, but I decided to commit myself in order to try to become a good role model. Furthermore, I was curious as to what extent the journal assignment would improve my own low-intermediate ability in Japanese. It was the first time I had the opportunity to see such a long assignment from the points of view of both teacher and student.

Some Problems

The biggest problems in this journal assignment involved the lack of time. For example, in order to wait for stragglers who were late to class and to show the students that I did indeed keep a Japanese journal, I gave the students and myself the first 10 to 15 minutes of every class to write in the journals. On some busy days such time spent was sorely missed, though, in general, I do not regret granting such time. Also, from a language student's standpoint, I found writing two or three B-5 sized pages on every line in a another language took up to three hours a week. When I asked the first term students informally how long it took them to fulfill the weekly requirement, they generally agreed that three to five hours a week was the amount of time they needed.

Another aspect of the problem of lack of time concerned reading and commenting of the journals collected. I would collect about six or seven journals on Friday morning, so on Friday afternoon and Saturday morning I would read them. On either Saturday or Monday morning, I would finish reading and then sit at the typewriter and write some comments on the content before I passed them back on Tuesday morning. Like Heath (1988), who used a journal in a class with American students, my comments too gave praise, asked questions, shared similar experiences, and added information. Here are some examples of such comments:

> Thanks for your journal. I noticed that you liked Natsume Souseki. Most of his works have been translated into English. I have not read him yet because I don't know what kind of author he is. Why do you like him? What is your favorite work?

> The information on improving health was very informative and interesting. The US and Western Europe have been concerned about their unhealthy populations for about the last 15 years. The main problems are lethargy (few physical activities) and appetite (the wish to eat). It is interesting that Japan too might be having the same problems.

Sometimes these comments were longer or shorter, but the essential point is that they took up two hours to compose. While I do not imply that it is necessary to write such comments, I feel it is important to let the students know their journals are being read. The praise in the comments is important, too, because, as Raimes (1983) clearly states:

> Good beginnings, felicitous phrases, pertinent word choice, smooth transitions, sound logic, humour, realistic and lively detail should all be praised so that students feel what they say is of prime importance and get a sense of what they can do well.

When students realized I was commenting on their work, some eagerly pasted the comments in their journals. Thus, the students acknowledged the process of communication : they wrote and I gave feedback. Also, a couple of students used the journal to ask me questions directly and I always answered in my comments. Perhaps this kind of communication was not in the introspective spirit of the journal, but to discourage such communication seemed churlish.

The lack of time, however, need not be such a problem. First, rather than reading the journals, teachers can simply count pages or scan to see whether that week's page requirement was fulfilled. One American high school teacher (Reed,1988) reports she neither corrects nor comments nor reads their journals on the ground that its benefits are for them, not her. Second, the required amount of writing could be decreased to one page or even a half-page a week. Third, teachers can decrease time spent on writing comments by having students mark specific passages on which they want comments (Heath, 1988). Fourth, of course, written responses are not essential because such comments and encouragement could also be given verbally when the journals are returned.

The second major problem posed the question of whether the journals should be corrected for syntactic and semantic errors. As research (Cohen & Robbins, 1976 ; Hendrickson, 1976 ; Hendrickson, 1977) has pointed out the dubious utility and efficiency of correcting every or nearly every error in student writing, I told the classes that I would not correct their journals. However, after about three weeks into the first term, I could tell that this policy dismayed the students so I relented to a small degree. I informed them that if they circled the part of the sentence they were unsure of, I would write the correct form, phrase or word in their journals. About two or three students circled awkward or incorrect constructions regularly, but the majority of students in both terms never circled anything. This may imply that Knowles' observation (ibid.) that in actuality students do not want to be corrected may well be true. Yet, as shown later in this paper, many students still declared that they wanted their journals to be corrected.

This 'to correct or not to correct' problem is troublesome. The students seem to expect it, which is no surprise considering the grand obsession with grammatical correctness on the part of Japanese learners of English. However, there are few English teachers who have the time or inclination to correct journals in addition to the stacks of compositions and other writing assignments already on their desks. Next, correction of the journal adds the threatening element of critical evaluation to the whole assingment. So, because the goal of the journal is to enable students to begin expressing their ideas without fear, correction seems out of place in this assignment. There is, of course, a place for error correction in writing class, but when the composition teacher reads a student's journal, the emphasis should be placed on whether the student has succeeded or failed in expressing his/her message, not on the acceptability or unacceptability of his/her grammar (Moneyhun, 1987).

The third major problem that arose during the course of the assignment was related to topics. At first, in both classes, the students expressed their concern over what they should

write about. Some even apologized in their journal because they thought they were boring me with trivial matters. I told the class again that any subject was acceptable, but I never used the word "diary" because, like Knowles (ibid.), I did not want to give the impression that the journal was a mere chronicle of their weekly round of classes, part-time jobs, and social activities. After that, the students began to write about a wider range of topics such as current events and local customs. After about three months, however, all classes began to deal with another problem involving topics: they were running out of ideas. I can verify from my experience writing my own journal that after writing about one's personal history and various other experiences, it is difficult to choose topics; after about three months, it seems most serious topics involve formidable vocabulary and intricate grammar. I could empathize with my students on this point. On the other hand, near the end of the classes more students began to discover a good solution: more extensive reading provided not only topics, but vocabulary as well. Thus, paraphrasing an article to make a summary and then adding personal observations became a little popular. To be honest, I did this often myself and found the newspaper The Okinawa Times to be a good source of information.

The fourth kind of problem involved tricks by a minority of students to deceive this once naive composition teacher into thinking they had done their best to fulfill the requirement. The worst trick involved copying directly from a book or magazine. Copying was always easy to identify on the rare occasions that it was encountered because the copier's awkward, tentative, or obscure prose would suddenly and miraculousy become smooth, confident, and clear. In such instances, I wrote in my comments that I wanted to read original work and the copiers never copied after that. In another case, to complete the number of pages near the end of the term, another student resorted to copying, but not much could be done about it. In other cases, students would copy out a favorite poem or transcribe the words to a popular song, but while I never encouraged this, I never discouraged it, either. I never explicitly banned copying in class because of my fear that it would implant rather than eradicate the whole idea of copying.

Other tricks were slightly more imaginative than mere copying. Sometimes comic fans among my students would draw pictures so large that I was forced to conclude they were drawn to take up space because the connection between the drawing and the topic was remote at best.[2] Newspaper articles and diagrams were occasionally pasted in perhaps with the same purpose in mind. Another trick involved writing lists or schedules in which one word or date would take up a whole line in the notebook. Finally, the subtle would unobtrusively but consistently skip a number of lines at the top or bottom of the page or between topics while the clumsy left half pages blank and still counted them as whole pages. I stopped those kinds of tricks early by writing in the journal itself things like "Stop it!" or "I know what you are doing. Quit it!" Such tricks should be swiftly and surely stopped because they defeat the point of the assignment: extensive and regular writing practice.

The final problem was the minor one of vacations because I was concerned that students would lose the skills they had developed after about three months of regular practice. At the University of the Ryukyus, the first term is split: classes go from April to the first week of July, most of July and all of August is vacation, and then the class meets again in September for a two to three week coda. The second term has a break of about one week for the university festival and two weeks for the New Year holidays. I feared that my first term stu-

dents would lose their gains in speed and accuracy so I assigned 10 pages to be written during summer vacation. In retrospect, I realized that five to seven pages would have sufficed because after vacation there were many reproachful looks from students who probably felt those 10 pages were too much to ask. Perhaps I had unwittingly stirred up unpleasant memories of their being forced to write kansoo-bun (compositions) during summer vacation in their primary school days. I required the second-term students to write about what they did during the university festival (one of the rare times in which I assigned a topic) and for New Year holidays, they had to write one page. Based on my own journal experience, I should add that vacations were excellent times to catch up in the journal and some students would probably agree.

Generally, the problems that emerged during the course of this assignment were minor. So, although the lack of time is almost an intractable problem, it is not impossible to manage and the resourceful teacher should have no trouble incorporating the journal into a writing class. Finally, the tricks are stopped easily enough by gentle but clear criticism.

The Questionnaire

Using a general form of questionnaire presented in Knowles (ibid.), I had the students give their reactions to the journal assignment anonymously. The results are presented below.

	SEMESTER 1 (24)	SEMESTER 2 (31)	% OF ALL 55 RESPONDENTS
1. You ____ keep your journal up to date.			
a. always	5	4	16
b. usually	8	7	27
c. sometimes	7	8	27
d. seldom	3	10	24
e. never	1	2	5
2. How often do you write in your journal?			
a. Every day.	4	0	4
b. Every few days.	5	11	35
c. Once a week.	9	13	40
d. Once in two weeks.	2	3	9
e. Just before the teacher collects.	4	4	15
3. How many hours do you spend in a week writing in your journal ?			
a. One hour.	2	1	5
b. Two hours.	6	9	27
c. Three hours.	9	8	31
d. Four hours.	5	6	20
e. More than four hours. How many?	1	7	15

Three students in the second term answered about five hours and one reported six hours.

4. You ____ enjoy writing in your journal.			
a. always	2	2	7
b. usually	8	8	39
c. sometimes	11	18	53
d. seldom	2	3	9
e. never	1	0	2
5. Writing in your journal is ____.			
a. very difficult	4	6	18
b. somewhat difficult	19	22	75
c. somewhat easy	1	3	7
d. very easy	0	0	0
6. Do you keep a journal in Japanese?			
a. Yes.	6	12	33
b. No.	18	19	67
7. Do you want the teacher to correct your journal?			
a. Yes.	22	19	75
b. No.	2	9	25
8. Those who agreed with the following statements.			
a. Your writing has improved since your began your journal.	21	26	85
b. You can write faster now.	15	21	65
c. Your vocabulary is bigger.	7	11	33
d. Your write longer sentences.	15	20	64
e. You like writing better now than before	15	20	64
f. Your writing is not different now than at the start of this calss.	5	2	13
g. You have more confidence when you write.	9	15	44

Questions 9 through 12 asked the students to give detailed answers. Question 9 asked what kinds of problems they had when writing their journals. Individuals complained of bad handwriting and lack of time. Others spoke of having problems differentiating between Western and Japanese logic or ways of thinking (one student) and not having any opinions about important matters (two students). Four students specifically complained of having grammar problems while the use of articles, prepositions, and connecting words each gave trouble to a different student. Organizing their prose and going off on tangents bothered four students. However, by far the most often cited problems involved vocabulary (21 students) and finding good topics (29 students). Here are some comments on these two areas:

> I cannot write my journal without using a Japanese-English dictionary, and I am looking at the dictionary many times, so it takes a lot of time to finish it.

> I feel that my vocabulary is very poor. For instance, when I want to write like as what I think in my mind, and I try to do, I cannot write it English as well . . . . Secondly, I didn't write the small nuance of words. And finally I couldn't find my journal subject so easily. I was often troubled about it.
>
> At first, I could write many things in my journal. But the more I wrote, the less subjects I had. It was the most difficult in writing to look for some subjects.

Question 10 asked about what kind of changes in their writing ability were caused by the journal. Individuals commented that their sentences had more variety and were clearer; that they used the subjunctive mood and idioms were used more fluently than before; and that they could practice using topic sentences and controlling ideas. Two students asserted their vocabularies were bigger, that they could express themselves in English more clearly and that they used conjunctive adverbs more accurately. Three students said they could write longer sentences more fluently. Another three said they felt they were more informed and attentive people now that they had to pay attention to life to get ideas for topics. Four specifically stated they gained more confidence through writing it. Six reported they enjoyed writing more and were now able to avoid directly translating from Japanese. In fact, seven mentioned that while writing, they were able to think in English. Finally, sixteen reported they were able to write faster because of their practice in the journal. Here are some comments written on the above points :

> I can write faster than before. In former days, I wrote journals in English after I did in Japanese, but I can write in English directly now.
>
> It has become easier to write English composition because the sentence I intend occurs to me in English, so I think my composition came to have steady continuity.
>
> I can write in English directly now. Japanese to English--the way of thinking in Japanese and writing it in English--has gone far away now !
>
> My writing became faster. I have many chances to know about things that I do not know well and built up my opinion. The journal gave me such chances.
>
> I have become more careful to see things, because I always looked for something to write in the journal.

Question 11 asked for general impressions about the journal. Individual observations included "useful, strict, tiring." Thirty-one students recorded a positive impression. Here are some general comments :

> I can easily see what I did this semester by looking at my journal.
>
> Writing a journal is the best in this stage. I feel English is more close to me. This kind of activity is indispensable for English students. . . .
>
> It was sometimes a kind of trouble for me. However, it surely improved my

English writing and it is one of the best ways to improve writing and thinking in English. I am going to continue to keep the journal in English.

I think it is a good idea. After a few years, you can look back in your journal and remember how and what you were thinking about in those days.

Question 12 asked the students for any suggestions on how to improve the journal assignment. The most common request (12 students) was that the teacher correct the journals. Two wanted the teacher to assign topics and one wanted dictation exercises to be placed into the journal. Surprisingly, only four made comments related to the page requirement: one said the number of pages should not be required, one said 35 pages were enough, while another said it was too much, and one said 25 pages would be a better requirement. It is also surprising that seven asked that the teacher collect the journals more often: one said every week, another said twice a month, and another not specific beyond wanting to present more than once a month. Perhaps these people felt it would motivate their self-discipline more if the journals were collected more often.

The questionnaire results showed that the journal assignment was generally well-received. Although students perceived difficulties using vocabulary and finding topics, they also felt the journal gave them a number of benefits. The general impression of the journal expressed by the students in this study was a positive one. And this positive evaluation still resulted from an assignment which was long, hard, and stern.[3]

Conclusions and Recommendations

From Knowles' and this work, it is clear that the journal assignment can be beneficial for students. First, they can become more comfortable and confident when writing in English. Second, the journal serves as a good proving ground for students who wish to practice material learned in class. Third, writing in a journal may not only stimulate student creativity, but also curiosity about life in general and this is surely a goal of education. Finally, reading their journals enabled me to understand them better as individuals.

There are several possibilities for future research using the journals. Statistical methods could be developed in order to measure how the assignment improves writing skills. Also, the data available is natural in the sense that students have produced it on their own, rather than being data drawn out of students with standardized tests. Research that compares grammar and organizational skills over time may provide valuable insights into how students acquire writing skills in an EFL setting. However, before research like the above is begun, the technical problems of determining reliability and validity must be solved.

We teachers should also use qualitative approaches in this kind of research. According to Gaies (1983), qualitative second language classroom research can help in the study of the learning process of the "quiet" language learner. Because Japanese students talk so little in class, new ways of investigating their progress--such as evaluating their journals--could provide the basis for wider research in Japan (Matsumoto, 1987). Journals provide us with data which can be analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively so new hypotheses about writing skill acquisition can be formed.

Notes

I would like to express my deepest thanks to Professor Anthony P. Jenkins whose pertinent suggestions and constructive criticisms have helped to improve this paper. Any errors, of course, are totally my own.

[1] The reader may smile at my banning of secrets. However, even in my limited experience in Japan, I have come to the unsettling conclusion that some Japanese may ask a foreigner questions they would never ask another Japanese (e. g. "What is your salary?" or "Do you believe in God?"). They may also tell things to a gaijin that are strictly private ("I don't like my father. He drinks too much, and my mother is afraid of him."). Heath (1988) reported that her students related horrific tales of physical abuse by their parents and even thoughts of suicide in their journals. As the lives of English teachers overseas are fascinating enough, they do not need to read journals that stimulate surprise, shock, pangs of conscience or phone calls to the authorities. In fact, students forget the ban, so remind the class "No secrets" after reading a journal passage that begins, "Teacher, don't tell anybody this, but. . . "

[2] Allowing drawings seems a good idea to break the monotony for students who are artistically inclined as long as the artwork is not counted as a page. Or, as a surprise at the end of the term, the kind teacher could allow the last pages to be art to give the students a well-deserved rest.

[3] A stern assignment on the grounds that two students in English Composition II failed because they did not fulfill the page requirement. One of those presented perhaps the most severe case of "grammar paralysis" I have ever seen. This student reported the fear of making a mistake was so great, he just could not write. An otherwise good and sincere student, he could not commit himself to his errors.

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